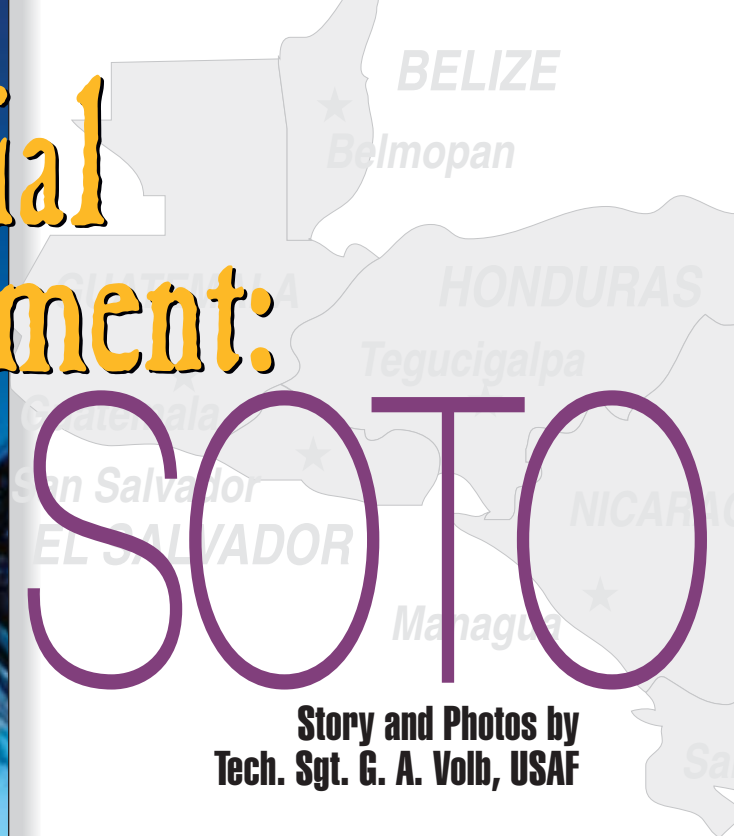




Special Assignment:



SOTO

**Story and Photos by
Tech. Sgt. G. A. Volb, USAF**

TUCKED away among banana trees and iguanas, in the north-west corner of Honduras, is one of those “special” Army assignments.

It’s where a small contingent of soldiers juggle an eclectic assortment of real-world missions and exercises under the auspices of Joint Task Force Bravo.

Based at little-known Enrique Soto Cano Air Base — just outside Comayaqua, the third largest city in the country — JTF-Bravo routinely participates in multi-national exercises and humanitarian-aid and drug-interdiction missions.

Air Force Tech. Sgt. G. A. Volb is assigned to the JTF-Bravo public affairs office.

Roatan Island off the Honduran coast is a popular travel destination for service members assigned to Joint Task Force-Bravo at Soto Cano.

CANO

The recipe for success here is as varied as the mission itself, calling for a mix of about 550 soldiers, airmen and marines. Most of them arrive at the “outpost” wondering what they’ve gotten themselves into. Quickly, they learn the challenges are well complemented by a vast array of off-duty programs and a thriving social life.

As an added benefit, the dollar still goes a long way in Honduras. And though Soto Cano is considered remote — one reason being that there is no fixed plumbing in the living facilities — most of the service members don’t seem to mind the short trek to the showers and latrine.

“We’re called ‘a non-permanent force,’” said CSM Andre Booker. “Among the reasons is the lack of permanent structures and plumbing on base, in keeping with an agreement between the United States and Honduras.”

“Not too many people know about Soto Cano, but once they hear about it, they’re intrigued,” said JTF-Bravo commander COL Michael Okita.

Honduras offers colorful wildlife, historic buildings, the ruins of lost civilizations and virtually untouched wilderness.

An assignment to the base offers soldiers the chance to work with the other services. And most personnel leave with a better understanding of how the different services work together to accomplish a mission, he said. “That’s the real value of coming to Honduras.

“One of the reasons most people don’t know about Soto Cano until they’re assigned here, is because we’re not making headlines,” Okita said. “But we continue to be a support base for American military operations in the theater, with primary responsi-



Copan Macaw



Church of Copan



Mayan ruins

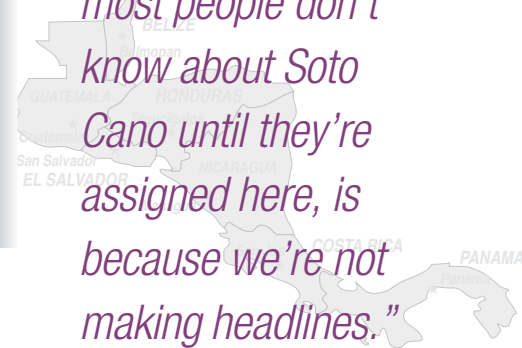


Yajea Waterfalls



Soldiers check each other's gear before rapeling from an Army UH-60 Black Hawk helicopter during training at Soto Cano.

"One of the reasons most people don't know about Soto Cano until they're assigned here, is because we're not making headlines."



bility to our joint operations area, which includes six countries in Central America."

Soto Cano supports the commander of U.S. Southern Command in carrying out any military operations in Central America. The broad range of missions includes responding to natural disasters, other crisis situations and humanitarian-aid contingencies.

Additionally, units at Soto Cano participate in scheduled engineering and construction programs, and medical-readiness training exercises that provide care to local villagers.

Besides Honduras, Soto Cano's area of responsibility includes Nicaragua, El Salvador, Guatemala, Costa Rica, Belize and Panama. "That's 172,000 square miles of territory and some 30 million people. It's an impoverished region of the world, but rich in history," Okita said.

"Our presence provides many things to the commander in chief responsible for the Central America area of operations," he added. "We support training, operate the only military airfield in the region capable of

accommodating a C-5 transport, and are a valuable transition point for people and supplies.

"This has really been an eye-opener for me," Okita said. "My first 21 years were primarily involved with battalion-level operations. Here you have the opportunity to work with other services and agencies, especially during disaster responses."

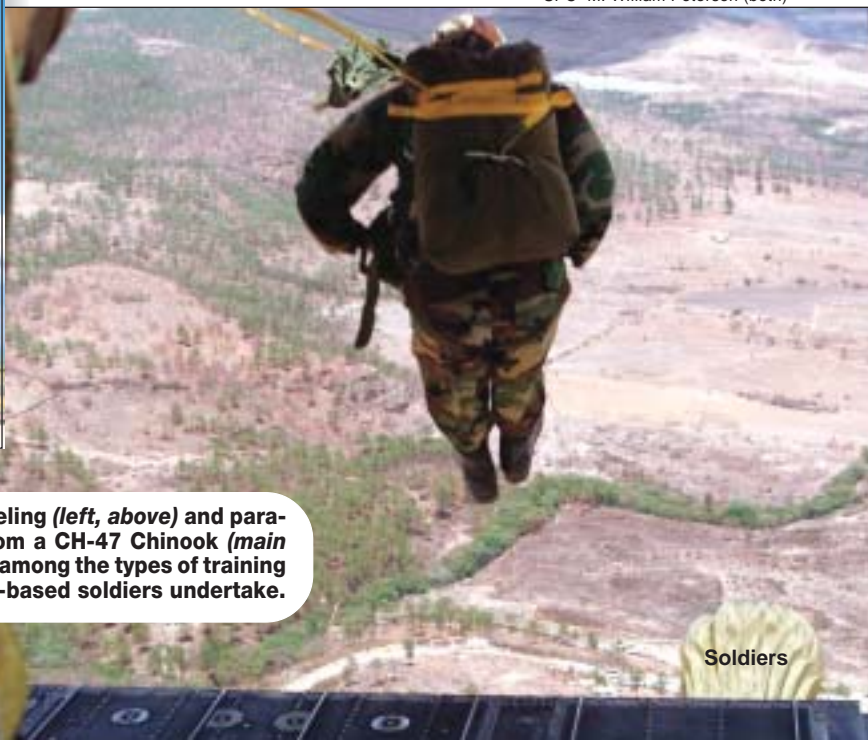
JTF-Bravo has recently been involved in such missions as New Horizons, a program to build schools and other basic infrastructure in Nicaragua and El Salvador; Central Skies, providing counter-drug support to local law-enforcement agencies; and medical readiness training exercises. Day-to-day

training events for the Army focus on common soldier skills, and include marksmanship training and rappelling.

"For the average soldier, the challenges of an assignment to Soto Cano can be cultural as well as mission-oriented," said Booker. "You really have to know your job, be able to work in a multi-service environment and, more importantly, a multi-national atmosphere. Most soldiers quickly learn this is one of those unique assignments where they'll actually get the chance to do their jobs. And they leave here glad they had that chance."

"We may be a temporary unit, technically, but we've been here 20 years and have a proven track record," Okita said. □

SPC M. William Petersen (both)



Tower rapeling (left, above) and parachuting from a CH-47 Chinook (main photo) are among the types of training Soto Cano-based soldiers undertake.